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中文题目 “打造社区”：小红书的性别、劳动与平台白话

外文题目 “Making a Community”: Gender, Labour and the Platform Vernacular on RED

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This empirical research could be seen as a preliminary study of my further ethnographic project on the intersections of gender, technologies, and digital platforms in the Chinese context. No matter how many flaws it may have, how many inquiries are to be settled, or how many doubts and insecurity I owe to myself, it is finished.

The past year has indeed become my biggest existential crisis, a time when I was intensively oppressed by the moments of fatigue stemming from not only my PhD application but also those bad days we had to collectively go through. The more bad days I encountered, the more profound those good days had become, in a way that I've come to realize just a "good" status is such a luxury for most of us. I keep my innocence, however, believing that if there is certain "goodness" in my own life, certain hope, empowerment, and recognition of the Other, perhaps academia has been (at least so far) a possible place for me to speak, to desubjugate, to reach out to the legitimacy of that "goodness." To many of you, my dear, I know that we've almost drained our tears in this endless spring, just like many other cruel springs we had witnessed before. But I still believe in that "goodness," or in Andrei Tarkovsky's words, I don't just believe it, I know that's how it will be.

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摘要

根据中国信通院2020年数据报告，全球企业市值排名前十名中平台企业的市值上升至74.8%，规模较2008年增长了近50倍。这标志着平台经济在过去十年中的迅速崛起和发展，平台研究也因此成为传播学界一个前沿的学术问题。而截至2021年11月，以中国年轻女性用户为主的社交媒体平台小红书月活已达2亿，其用户画像使得小红书在全球平台生态中成为了一个极具特殊性的案例。

本论文试图以小红书平台为案例，关注该女性网络社区的特殊性，以探讨中国平台经济背景下女性的数字实践。本论文采用质性的研究方法，包括进行为期两个月的数字民族志，以及对小红书上8位女性用户/博主进行深度访谈，研究小红书上的女性主体如何进行劳动、并致力于塑造该数字媒体平台上的社会性（sociality），以及她们如何看待小红书平台呈现的性别化的社区关系。

研究结论认为，小红书通过协调“平台界面”和“可供性”，建立了一个针对女性的“情感环境”，以此对女性用户的“品牌奉献劳动”（brand devotion labour）实现最大程度的货币化。在小红书的平台界面设计中，视觉内容和标签的使用占据主导地位，加剧了平台对一种性别化“魅力”（glamour）的强调，塑造了一种“精致生活”的平台白话（platform vernacular）。除此之外，“种草”作为一种平台白话，其中涵纳了对女性的性别化假设。性别偏见被该平台复制、正常化和工具化，一个女性通过社交媒体积极参与企业品牌推广的网络社区得以形成。

然而，另一方面，平台白话的形成是平台和用户实践之间一个持续的协商过程。女性用户她们对自己使用小红书的特定目的表述，表明她们在参与这个数字社区的时候不仅仅是被动的“受害者”。相反，即使她们的想法依然体现了一种强调自我责任、以个体为中心的后女性主义话语，她们往往也能意识到使用该平台时所产生的负面情绪（如强烈的社会比较“social comparision”）。因此，小红书有机会进行平台演化，从而不再局限于一个网络消费空间，而时常被描述为一个搜索引擎类的、去中心化的、性别友好的社区。

关键词： 平台白话；性别；数字劳动；后女性主义

Abstract

According to the data report of China Academy of Information and Communiations Technology (CAICT) in 2020, the market value of platform corporates among the top 10 global market capitalization has seen a dramatic growth to 74.8%, with a nearly 50-fold increase in scale compared to 2008. This marks the rapid rise and development of the platform economy over the past decade, positioning platform studies as a frontier scholarly issue. By November 2021, the monthly active users of RED, a social media platform dominated by Chinese young female, has reached 200 million, marking a distinctive case in the global platform landscape.

This thesis attempts to take this platform as a case study, focusing on the specificity of this feminized online community to explore women's digital practices in the context of Chinese platform economy. Drawing on qualitative methods including a two-month digital ethnography and depth interviews with with 8 female users/bloggers on RED, it examines how female subjects on RED not only labor, but also commit to shaping the community and sociality on digital media platforms, as well as how they perceive this gendered community relation presented on the RED platform.

My work argues that RED orchestrate the interfaces and affordances to set up an affective environment targeting at women, optimizing the monetization of female users' labour of brand devotion. The predominance of visualized content and the use of hashtags on RED within its interface design accelerate a particular gendered emphasis on glamour, shaping its platform vernacular of "an exquisite life." *Zhongcao* is a particular platform vernacular of RED, in which a gendered assumption of women has been inscribed. A gender bias is reproduced, normalised, and instrumentalized by the platform to cultivate an online community where female actively engage with the promotion of corporate brands through social media.

Yet on the other hand, the formation of this platform vernacular is an ongoing process of negotiation between the platform and the users' practices. Through female users' own articulation of their usage of RED for specific purposes, they are not only passive victims while engaging with this digital community. Instead, they are often fully aware of the negative feelings generated, such as the intensive social comparison, despite the fact that the corrective for dealing with these issues is still centering on self-responsibility as a key manifestation of a postfeminist discourse. The platform then

obtains a chance to evolve into online space not only for consumption, but also being characterized as a search-engine like, decentralized, and gender-friendly community.

Key Words: platform vernacular, gender, digital labour, postfeminism

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Content

1. Introduction

"Here, beautiful female bloggers are all 'independent', able to make money, and have lots of leisure time. A satisfied and carefree expression was fixing on their faces, where conflicts of human nature and society have all disappeared... these faces are being shaped by algorithms and consumerism all the time. It induces anxiety, and the solution to anxiety is to continue to climb upward in this pyramid of beauty."[1]

This was quoted from the article named *Women in the Internet Celebrity Economy* released by GQ Report in 2021, in which working conditions of the female bloggers on RED (a popular Chinese digital platform whose most users are female) were revealed and they were portrayed as the victims of social media, influencer culture, and a series of negative effects and disciplines generated. In contrast, in a recent interview with the COO of RED, Kenan, she described this as a taken-for-granted prejudice of the platform, " 'an app for female' is the label of RED which has been deeply rooted in public discourses in the past few years, actually it deepens the prejudice of the outside world against the product."

While the platform has been trying to "de-gender" RED in recent years by expanding its market and users, it is hard to dismiss the gendered aspects hidden behind this social media platform: why RED emerges as a distinctive digital platform targeting women in the context of Chinese prosperous platform economy? Why do Chinese young women gather in this specific digital sphere?

RED was founded by Mao Wenchao and Qu Fang in 2013 in Shanghai. According to relevant media reports, the founders' initial purpose was to make up for the market vacancy in which platforms could be designed for information sharing on overseas shopping. At the early development of RED, the main focus of the platform is its brands' gathering and content (generated by "real" users), which precisely coincided with the dramatic rise of Chinese cross-border shopping. In the following year, RED hoped to cash the network traffic it had accumulated and started its own e-commerce business. In 2014, RED developed a commercial model called "direct delivery service and bonded warehouse," at the same time also collaborating directly with overseas brands or large traders, but could be hardly competitive in the Chinese cross-border

[1] Women in the Internet Celebrity Economy, GQ Report, June, 2021.

e-commerce market which was largely dominated by other platforms such as TMall and Jingdong.

With users exceeding 150 million in 2018, RED started to explore its development strategy called "community commercialization" and initiated a series of relevant businesses. Since then, RED started to publicly disseminate the discourses of "sharing beauty" and "authenticity." In her public speech, Qu Fang defined RED as "the good life you will have," "the largest community for sharing lifestyle," and "not designed for used not celebrities but ordinary people like you and me" and vocabularies like "playground," "virtual city," and "community" continuously appeared in her interviews. According to relevant data, RED had accumulated 50 million users from 2013 to 2017, and the number doubled to 100 million by April 2018. According to official data, RED's current monthly active user volume has exceeded 85 million, nearly three times that of a year ago, with a total of 250 million users, and the post-90s and post-95s have become the mainstream users of the community.

Whether from RED's set up with the boom of Chinese cross-border shopping, when it was initially designed as an e-commerce platform dominated by women who transnationally consumed commodities like cosmetics, food and beverage, mom & baby necessities, and shared product reviews, or to its marketing transformation from "connecting Chinese consumers with global retailers" to "community commercialization," RED is situated as a platform in the Chinese media landscape with near 90% users are female that points directly at young women within a frame of globalized consumer culture and plays a prominent role, especially in surging iterative waves of prevailing beauty standards and normative femininities. Either in public discussions or even less academic discourses, RED is frequently taken as a successful exemplar of corporate marketing "under the feminist view" (Lian, Chen & Zhang, 2021), without a focus on the imbricate gender power relations of its platform ecosystem. While the digital cultural work of these young, educated and middle-class women could be effortlessly located as entrepreneurial practices of "self-promotion, self-reliance, and self-governance" (Salime, 2014) in a "postfeminist era," there is an urgent need to focus on the specificity of this social media platform, as related studies have only examined the relationship between women and digital media production, the question of why they choose to use this specific platform has been obscured, risking a tendency to gross generalizations of localized, platform-specific digital practices in a

postfeminist era. Besides, studies on the feminization of digital work only consider the (precarious) working conditions of female digital laborers, but not about how these laborers themselves perceive and articulate their platform practices and digital sociality, which is the platform-based female community in this case. These questions need to be answered especially considering the factor that gender power relations in different media landscapes and contexts would also affect the formation of a certain gendered online community.

Centering on the political economy and the user's practices of RED, this thesis firstly aims to fill in the gap of a specific gender focus in Chinese process of platformization. Besides, I steer away from a common tendency to "understand the flow of influence (in the feminization of digital labor) as unidirectionally from the "global" to the "local" or the women as passive victims of neoliberal capitalism." (Zhang, 2018), but aim to more fully theorize their formation and understand the complex interplay between the users of a platform and its technical and materialist features by locating them to the context of platform-based cultural production.

Research Questions

Considering the aforementioned objectives, this study addresses these three major questions:

Q1. Why do young women choose to post on RED for the same digital content production that is closely related to consumer culture (or postfeminism, etc.)?

Q2. How do Chinese female subjects on RED not only labor, but also commit to shape the community and sociality on digital media platforms?

Q3. How do Chinese young female perceive this gendered community relation presented on the RED platform?

2. Literature Review

My study builds on literature in postfeminism, platform studies, and gendered digital labor with attention to a non-western context. I intersect these three strands of scholarship together as a possible site to theorize about the formation of gendered subjects vis-à-vis digital cultural production as well as in what ways they actually participate in, interact with, and navigate the platform.

Postfeminism In a non-Western Context

Ever since 1990s, the notion of postfeminism has become a key term in feminists' critical vocabulary in Western feminist studies, which has been characterized as a backlash; an epistemological break within feminism, suggesting an alignment with other "post" movements in academic theories; or to propose connections to the Third Wave (Gill, 2016). Among the most fundamental formulations within feminist media and cultural studies, postfeminism is defined as "the undoing of feminism" and a "contemporary sensibility" deeply enmeshed with neoliberalism (McRobbie, 2004; Gill, 2007). However it may be, postfeminism era is theorized as a phenomenon that the mainstream media "promulgates the conviction as well as the sensibility that the goals of feminism have already — more or less — been achieved" and thus there is no need for collective women's movements (Rottenberg, 2018). This ideology is mainly manifested in enormous successful female representations or celebrities in mass media and popular culture where much emphasis was put on individualism, agency, independence, personal achievement and self-promotion. According to Angela McRobbie, contemporary popular culture "effectively engages in the repudiation and undoing of feminism, while simultaneously, takes it into account" (McRobbie, 2004). Another defining feature in postfeminism is the intertwining discourses of neoliberal brand culture, Web 2.0 interactivity, and post-feminism, which "all rely ideologically and materially on individuals..." and put much emphasis on becoming "the entrepreneur of self." (Banet-Weiser, 2012) However, it is until recent days when research started to notice that postfeminism is increasingly becoming global rather than phenomenon that only appears in western societies. Female subjects in earlier studies on postfeminism is often white, middle-class, and heterosexual by default. The critiques of Jess Butler (2013) and Simidele Dokesun (2015), in which they argue that scholars need to rethink

this issue racially and transnationally, are most representative in this aspect. According to Banet-Weiser et al. (2020), this shifting focus is a result of recent interrogations having "pushed beyond the terms of inclusion versus exclusion."

In China, a nascent body of scholarship have argued that postfeminism also exists in a localized context due to the global expansion of neoliberal capitalism. These works analyze how various gendered discourses, narratives and representations circulating on media were also discovered incorporated into neoliberal and consumerist culture. As Judith Butler argues, "for politics to take place, the body must appear" (Butler, 2015). During the first decade of 21st century, the full boom of beauty economy in China was seen as an essential terrain inersected with body, labour, neoliberalism and postfeminism. Jie Yang (2011) analyzes how the gendered discourse, nennu ("tender" women) and shunu ("ripe women") constitutes the project of China's consumer capitalist development and nation building. In her ethnographic work at beauty salons, she points out that beauty care workers fall victims to gender exploitation as they are much paid less compared to other industries which are also dominated by male.

Entering a digital age, postfeminist media culture became unprecedentedly complicated at the nexus of media platforms, technology, and digital content production. One particular example would be Chinese *wanghong,* whether in a form of culture, industry, identity, or social media entertainment. As discussed above, there are very limited research who insist a gendered focus on Chinese *wanghong* phenomenon. For example, Dippner (2018) contends that *wanghong's* ambivalences of neoliberal strategies are particularly clear reflected and their work on the body is seen as "one of many measures to optimize opportunities and build capacities against systemic challenges". Sarah Liao (2021) points out in her study that the femininity evoked by *wanghong* is not only entrepreneurial but also interwoven with patriotic and nationalistic sentiments which cater to the need of the state in its pursuit of social and economic development

In summary, postfeminism is also closely attached to consumer culture and the rising of neoliberlism in China, and indeed, it is simultaneously interwoven with the localized history of its gender politics. However, the majority of these analyses are still limited to the scope of cinemas, magazines, and advertisements (Yang, 2020; Sue & Feng, 2010), which I argue, are insufficient that they may direct us away from focusing on the specific formation, negotiation, and actual practices of gendered subjects,

especially when post-, neoliberal and popular feminism all *depend on* and *validate* media platforms (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). Besides, the term coined by some works has a danger to reproduce stigmatization, while the complexities of how this globally mediated sensibility is both internalized and challenged by localized gender ideologies are undermined through a process of defining what is an "authentic" one. In her article, Yang (2020) coins a term of "consumerist pseudo-feminism", arguing that postfeminism in China is distinctive from its Western counterpart in terms of the class, the female elites' relationship with the state, and postfmeinism's entanglement with local feminisms. Although she claims to use a transnational framework, she still takes western liberal feminism as a normative exemplar to "make distinctions." As Meng (2015) suggests in her research on gendered discourse of online shopping festival in China, the hard-won progress on the gender front in socialist era once "had a chance to evolve into the politics of recognition in the Western liberal democratic sense before it was kidnapped by consumer capitalism," to a large extent stimulating postfeminism in China to empower women by encouraging them to embrace femininity rather than remaining a stereotypical image of "socialist androgyny". In her study on women who transnationally resell luxuries in China, Zhang (2018) examines the relationships between neoliberal global capitialism and the resurgence of traditional Confucian gendered norms in shaping the gendered prosuming subjects. In her analysis, prosuming subjectivities are "necessary to constituting a different regime of accumulation and economic rationality" these women are "personifying the nation's struggles at this particular historical conjuncture in which different elements – traditional, socialist, and neoliberal capitalist – battle to define their identity." (Zhang, 2018) The works of Meng and Zhang implicate that while contextualizing feminism in a non-western context, it is essential to add more nuance analysis and evaluations. As what Nikolas Rose (2017) proposes that in the past few years, "(N)eoliberalism becomes... an all-purpose term of critique in much contemporary critical social science... leading to totalizing analyses where neoliberalism is ubiquitous and omnipresent, a catch-all phrase and thus a sociological banality." (Rose, 2017)

To more fully understand the rise of postfeminism in a non-western context in the last decade, my project articulates this consumerism-oriented, strongly aesthetic, and highly gendered app with women's involvement in Chinese platform economy. This will also contribute to existing western-centric literature on postfeminism with more

intersectional and transnational approaches (Butler, 2013; Dokesun, 2015).

With gender issues constantly arousing furious public debates in the past five years in China, postfeminism practices are further situated in a more imbricated and ambivalent way, as they are deployed with the emerging gender-sensitive subjects faced with localized gendered norms and globalized development of capitalism, technology, and digital media. In this way, platform studies will provide a prominent perspective that sheds light on in which ways gendered subjects engage with digital content production on social media platforms, bringing insights into how are gendered subjectivities and media interrelated in contemporary society. However, few scholars of postfeminism in China examine the relationships between gendered user practices and the platform, As Duffy (2015) proposes in her study that we need to "re-evaluate the nexus of gender, labour and technologies in sites of creative production that are symptomatic of the Web 2.0 era." In this conjuncture when postfeminism works as a transnational sensibility rather than a historical moment, I denaturalize the development of RED by combining platform studies and postfeminism, which will bring insights into the ways in which female subjectivities have been shaped, mobilized and socialized in platformed cultural production from a politico-economic and socio-technical perspective.

Female Subjects in Consumption in China

In addition to technological perspectives, it is important to look at how platformization is taking place in different societies. While scholars tend to focus on rapidly evolving platform-based mechanisms, the position of platforms "in the longer historical patterns of capitalism as a global system" is often obscured (Zhang, 2020). As a consumerist decision-making portal, one defining characteristic of RED is its emphasis on female consumption. This, in particular, is historically echoing with the changing position of female subjects in Chinese consumer culture since the opening reform in 1980s.

"Her-economy" began to widely circulate in business discourses from 2007 to stress the importance of female subjectivity to a consumption-driven economy (Yang, 2020). It refers to an economic phenomenon that more and more businesses are starting to identify their consumers and develop new commercial products predicated on women's needs and demands as a nascent economic growth point is being formed when

female are gradually possessing more and more independence, autonomy, and power in consumption. Leaving that whether such claim is validated or not, this market strategy targeting at women as particularly potential consumers could be manifested in various commercial products and advertisements such as chick-flicks and cosmetics (Yang, 2020; Li, 2020). In the Web 2.0 era, "Her-economy" was to a larger extent accelerated at the nexus of digital platforms, technology and the prosperity of e-commerce. A clear case would be Alibaba's glamourization of International Women Day as "Goddess Day" to depoliticize its meanings and promote internet shopping.

Following the prosperous her-economy, Chinese explosively growing *wanghong* industry is another essential entry point to analyze the interactions between female subjects and consumerism, which is further intertwined with digital platforms. *Wanghong*, short for *wangluo hongren* in Chinese, literally refers to a person who obtains popularity on the Internet. Since 2016, the term started to proliferate in nation-wide media coverage and arouse heating social debates. In some ways, *wanghong* is taken as Chinese version of microcelebrity, which was initially coined by Theresa Senft in her research on camgirls and used to describe how these female subjects take up various strategies to present themselves as "branded packages" to their online fan base. (Senft, 2008) In Annet Dippner's studies on Chinese social media celebrities, *wanghong* mostly refers to those "whose profile on social media platforms arouses such great public interest that his or her pictures or videos are virally circulated and shared by tens of thousands, up to millions of fans and followers who subscribe to his or her profile page or visit it regularly, without any personal contact between the profile owner and the fans," and is taken as "the Chinese counterpart to the new professional group of 'Instagram Influencers' in the Euro-American region." (Dippner, 2018) According to Crystal Abidin, " 'Influencer' is a particular type and the epitome of internet celebrities, referring to a group of people make a living from being celebrities native to and on the Internet" (Abidin, 2018a). Indeed, *wanghong* share some similarities with fashion and beauty bloggers on YouTube or Instagram, for instance, who make a career out of their work, pursuing empowerment and individual success centering a key logic of self-branding, self-promotion and consuming power. Another strand of works in this field, however, termed the larger industrialized ecology of online celebrities as "social media entertainment" (SME), referring to "an emerging proto-industry fueled by professionalizing, previously amateur content creators using

new entertainment and communicative formats to develop potentially sustainable businesses based on significant followings that can extend across multiple platforms." (Craig & Cunningham, 2019). As an industry based on digital platforms, *wanghong* in China is a "parallel universe" in many ways to those seen in Western countries (Cunningham et al., 2021).

The aforementioned studies offer western references and a chance to intersect the strands of works in political economy, technology, and media platforms to analyze *wanghong*, whether it as a social phenomenon or a rapidly growing industry. However, it is extremely crucial to notice that *wanghong* is a highly gendered term since it was born. This is why I need to draw upon theory in feminist media scholarship to reveal the gendered dynamics hidden, and the cultural implications of the interplay between cultural production and technology within the platform society, which still remains understudied.

Platform Affordances and Vernaculars

Positioning itself as a "lifestyle sharing platform," RED appears at a time when various social media platforms have overwhelmingly infiltrated in nearly every public sector of our society in the past two decades. Specifically, a platform is defined as the programmable architecture designed to organize the connectivity between different users (van Dijck, 2013; van Dijck, Poell & de Waal, 2018). In the digital media landscape, "platforms are emerging as not just software-based media but also governing systems that control, interact and accumulate." (Schwarz, 2017) Scholars have theorized the penetration of economic, governmental and infrastructural extensions of these digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems as the process of "platformization." (Helmond, 2015; Nieborg & Poell, 2018). As big techs and social media platforms such as Google, Twitter and Facebook are so ubiquitously embedded in our daily activities, some scholars have proposed the "platformization of infrastructures" and the "infrastructuralization of platforms" (Plantin et al., 2016) to refer to the increasingly blurring boundaries between these two realms in contemporary society.

Recent works in platform studies have drawn upon different disciplinary lenses to understand platforms considering the hybrid social actors involved. As the programmability is seen as the very fundamental feature of a digital platform, the field

of information systems management and design studies are mostly concerned with their "certain systemic attributes, known as the direct, technical interplatform affordances and connections." (Schwarz, 2017) Scholars in critical political economy, however, especially focus on the formations of platform capitalism. These works are mainly based on Marxist political economy, examining issues of power centralization and capitalist monopoly under platform economy as well as the exploitation and precarious working conditions of platform users. In business studies, platforms function in a "multi-sided market", meaning they are not only constituted by platform holders and users, but also different platform "complementors." (Nieborg & Poell, 2018) These aforementioned works have not only demonstrated that platforms are situated in an interdisciplinary scholarly framework, but also suggested that they could not be separated from different social and political structures. In this sense, platform studies need to commit to a macro-level analysis, examining the geopolitics of platform societies in a global context (van Dijck & de Waal, 2018).

Among these works in platform studies, the concept of "affordances" is especially receiving scholarly attention and often used to refer to the relationship between the technology and the users. The term was originally proposed by Gibson (1979) which represents "action-capacities," meaning the opportunity for "an interaction between the technical properties of an object and the actions of a social agent." In the original formulation, affordances were understood as the objective, latent possibilities present in an environment that actors could act on in specific ways. Recent literature in the field of communication studies has drawn on the concept to better shed light on the encounter between people and digital objects. In the field of communication studies, the concept of "communication affordances" proposed by Hutchby (2001) directs us away from situating affordances as technological features and architectures, but referring to the "encounter" itself, namely where "certain objects, environments or artefacts have affordances which enable the particular activity while others do not" (Hutchby, 2001). Evans et al. (2017) argue the affordance is "the variable process that mediates between the two." Despite recent works having made critiques the lack of conceptual clarity in this concept (see Sun & Han, 2020), I draw upon two terms specifically to guide my analysis about why young female users are particularly using RED for content production. I draw upon on the term "vernacular affordances," developed by Taina and Helmond (2017), where "affordances become as much part of users' experiences and

perceptions of technologies as of the technologies themselves". This concept would help me to address the question of how female users themselves articulate their platformed practices and digital sociality shaped on RED. Here, I use the notion of "platform vernaculars", as Gibbs et al. (2015) describes as the phenomenon that each platform has its own specific mix of "styles, grammars, and logics," which contribute to what is possible here, through the affordances provided, adapted and appropriated (p. 257). However, they also highlight the vernacular of a platform is not only developed from platform affordances, but also from the mediated practices and communicative habits of users. (p. 257) Thus, the concept of platform vernacular points out that the interaction between platforms and users is an ongoing process, and "the creativity of users to repurpose platform allowances and limitations for particular modes of expression" (Burgess, 2006; Keller, 2019). In this way, the concept allows us to not only explore the particular forms of participation on social media platforms, but also "attend to the registers of meaning and affect that are produced within platform-based social networks" (Gibbs et al., 2015).

Apart from the theorization of the platform vernacular and affordances, scholars usually bifurcate current platform geographies into two segments: American GAFAM and Chinese BAT companies (Nieborg, Duffy & Poell, 2020). Alongside a vast number of works addressing the US-dominated platform ecosystems, platforms in China where lies the second largest media market in the world, are entrenched in its own politico-economic context. For example, Craig et. al (2021) have proposed that China has been especially following a trajectory of "hyperplatformization" and "interplatformization." In their works, it is pointed out that Chinese platforms feature more speediness in the adoption of technologies and engagement in interoperability, which have created a both more collaborative and competitive platform landscape compared to its western counterpart (Craig et. al., 2021, p. 63).

However, as de Kloet et al. (2019) correctly argues, while such division of global platform landscape has been increasingly going without saying in academic discourses, it has a danger to reproduce geopolitical binaries between China and the West and totalizing analyses as if China is just another "fixed homogeneous entity." Instead of simplifying platformization in Chinese society as a general context which together with the US dominated platforms in the world, "the challenge is to explore overlaps and similarities, alongside differences, and to zoom in on contradictions, ambivalences, and

connections." (de Kloet et al., 2019) Following this scholarly strand, a good exemplar would be Zhang's research on Alibaba, in which she did not simplify its platform evolution as a local version of globalized platform capitalism, but a larger story about its encounter and convergence with Chinese petty capitalism — the small-scale and family-based flexible regimes of production (Zhang, 2020).

In addition to the sociotechnological and geopolitical perspectives, another issue in platform studies is that inequalities in gender, race and class is often obscured in this process. Since its birth, the flaunt of "public accessible" for every subject have been their defining nature which promise open and public sphere to promote democracy, power decentralization and an egalitarian society. However, it is pointed out that platforms are not always open for everyone but have risks reproducing inequalities in terms of gender, race and class. Schor et al. (2016) have suggested that there is a "paradox of openness and gendered/racialized distinction in sharing economy. In all four cases of their research, whiteness and gender dynamics are manifested across different platforms despite their "discursive frame of inclusion." Therefore, as some scholars have pointed out, there is an urgency for recent works to include a focus on what gender bias is hidden and subjugated when we investigate internet infrastructures and materialities in platform studies (Hearn & Banet-Weiser, 2020).

The aforementioned works offer an interdisciplinary framework to understand how RED is structured and organized, creating spaces to both afford and govern various forms of digital cultural production. However, as is discussed above, it is important to explore the often obscured genderd division — in this case, the feminization of cultural production. Drawing upon feminist media scholarship, this thesis aims to bring insights into the interplay between localized gendered hierarchy and platform economy in a non-western context to fill in this gap. Besides, a nuance analysis on the operation of RED steers away from simplifying it as "China's answer to Instagram," which aims to provide understandings of its distinct from its "western counterpart" — whether it ever does exist.

Gender and Immaterial Labour

While the aforementioned works in platform studies and postfeminism offers historical, technological and social context in which digital workers are shaped, less research focus on how subjects perceive, feel, and labour in the context of platform

economy. As Duffy et al. (2019) argued, platformization is institutional as well as rooted in "platform practices", which are the specific and diverse "strategies, routines, experiences, and expressions of creativity, labor, and citizenship that shape cultural production through platforms." In the past few years, a vast number of studies have drawn from the concepts of immaterial labor and affective labor (Lazzarato, 1996; Hardt, 1999) to study labor practices in digital economy, developing concepts like "venture labor," (Neff, 2012) "hope labor," (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013) and "aspirational labor" (Duffy, 2015) to describe how laborers identify themselves and engage in the precarious digital work. Emotions, feelings and affections come to play a prominent role in cultivating a platform vernacular that contributes to its community function and the logic of "sharing as morality," which differentiates its major business from other e-commerce platforms. A strand of academic works to understand this issue is the notion of "emotional labour" introduced by sociologist Hochschild (1983). According to her statement, feeling is a form of pre-action or a script and it functions according to feeling rules, which refer to "what guides emotion work by establishing the sense of entitlement or obligation that governs emotional exchanges" (Hochschild, 1983, p. 56). She indicates that the feeling rules are determined by the social and cultural environment, where people have particular ways to recognize feeling rules and give rule reminders, making people account for what they feel or to respond (Hochschild, 1983, p. 58). In the private emotional system, the rule reminders are normally free from observation entangling with social and cultural conditions. Yet, the commercial use of emotions has transformed the intangible rule reminders to various management tactics: in the airline industry, for instance, airline attendants are constantly reminded by their managers to 'put-on' the smiles. In live-streaming, streamers are reminded by the visual effects of virtual gifting to account for their positive feelings, such as gratitude and happiness, and to express these affects in the chat-rooms.

Another important notion in studying emotions' functions in cultural production and digital labour is the notion of immaterial labour proposed by Lazarrato's in 1996. According to Lazarrato (1996), immaterial labour refers to the labour that involves activities that are not recognised as work in information and cultural content production. Earlier studies in digital economy introduced this framework to point out that labourers were often unpaid in digital content production (Terranova, 2000). The voluntary online

activities of chatting, mailing, and building communities in virtual spaces blur the boundaries between work and life, as well as complicate the relation between production and consumption (Ye, 2020). However, with evolving platform economy gradually expanding its market into a multi-sided one, many platforms' business models are becoming much more complicated which involves more social actors, and digital practices often indeed generate economic earnings rather than remain "free labour。"

Further developed by Hardt (1999), the notion of "affective labour" drew upon the notion of immaterial labour and was used to refer to affects ranging from "a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion — even a sense of connectedness or community" in digital production (Hardt, 1999). In recent research on digital labour, affective labour was one of the key notions to analyze labour practices in the context of platform society. For example, Arcy (2016) resituated affective labour as a feminized immaterial labour in the digital sphere by connecting women's putative "natural expertise in expressing and managing emotions" with the digital labour of performing "microacts of 'liking'" (p. 367).

Although gendered subjectivities were often glossed over in earlier research on these topics, recent scholars have gradually shed light on the feminized attributes of digital work and how the gendered history of labour has extended into the platform economy (Duffy & Schwartz, 2018; van Doorn, 2017). In the Chinese context, a small but growing number of studies started to examine the relationships between laborers in platform economy and their gender roles such as female live streamers, beauty bloggers and food-delivery riders (Ye, 2020; Guan, 2021; Sun, 2021). Ye's (2020) research on Chinese female live-streamers reveals that while heterosexual gendered power relations are inscribed in platform affordances of chatrooms, female streamers have to strategically negotiate their intimate relationships with their viewers and constantly navigate the live-streaming economy. Guan (2021) focuses on beauty bloggers in China and especially connects this digital content genre with the prosperity of beauty industry since its reform and opening-up in 1990s.

Following the aforementioned studies, this thesis aims to further contribute to filling the gaps of research on female/gendered subjectivities in the realm of digital labor, as Sun (2021) suggests, existing literature on female workers are often based on "occupational categories" and the platform is often taken as a singular, universal, and

taken-for-granted context, which has risks in leading to gross generalizations of different digital labourers. Together with postfeminism, in which an important strand of academic works focused on "psychic and affective life" of female subjects (Scharff, 2016; Gill & Kanai, 2018) that still remains understudied in the Chinese context, this study will examine female digital labor by committing to nuance analyses on RED which is especially distinctive for its feminized sociality and community. While focusing on the relationships between gender and labour in platform-based cultural production, it steers away from considering their working conditions as simply precarious or their labour as unconscious self-exploitation. Instead, it is expected to better understand how do they actually acknowledge, perceive, and make sense of their digital labour and content production.

3. Methodology

As methods are not "sitting in a toolbox waiting to be applied" (Bal, 2002), I develop an integral framework by using a mixture of diverse qualitative research methods, including online ethnographic methods (participant observation and in-depth interviews) and consulting secondary resources (the commercial archives, economic documents, and data reports of RED, etc.).

I began my fieldwork from my online participant observations on RED at the end of October in 2020. RED is considered as a Chinese counterpart to Instagram mainly because that they are both full of "aesthetic visual communication." (Manovich, 2017) But "visual imagery is never innocent; it is always constructed through various practices, technologies and knowledge." (Rose, 2001) Previous research on Chinese social media platforms have demonstrated that the genres, textuality, cultural implications of content are crucial to understand users' practices and subjectivities (Wang, 2016; Craig, Lin & Cunningham, 2021). Therefore, my analysis on the aesthetics of RED aims to consider the social practices and effects of the posts' circulation and viewing, reflecting on the specificity of that viewing shaped by and interacted with female users on RED. The accounts and profiles I chose to examine are based on a third-party data website called *Xinhong*, which contains the overall data flow of the most popular bloggers, content, and topics in each category. This website has two major functions. Firstly, it can help me to confirm whether the accounts I chose to observe are amateur producers or not due to the fact that I can search their names on this website and there is information of whether a user is professional or not that opens to public. Secondly, as what I seek to answer is how to *theorize* the aesthetics of RED rather than numerically make a list of all the content genres or aesthetic forms, the major function of using this website is to browse the #Topics (hashtags) that ranked top ten in a month, helping me to identify which hashtags were afforded by the platform. In this way, I will be reminded which posts adding these hashtags I may need to pay attention to during my observation. I have regularly checked RED at least five times a day for a period of three months, including using it for searching content, recording trendy topics, checking the postings of my observation participants, and then take down the field notes in detail. Through digital ethnographic methods, blog postings, online

chats and other virtual communication can be stored, archived and searched (Brennen, 2017).

The second component of my methodological approaches is semi-structured depth interviews. Although platform complementors such as advertisers and multi-channel networks play a key role in the context of platform economy, I did not bring them into my discussions as I narrow my research question within content producers and users due to the time and financial limitations. Interview participants I recruited have to meet three criteria which coincide with the features of the platform: (1) they are female users; (2) they might receive economic rewards through their content but they do not sign up any agencies, which means that they are part-time or non-professional bloggers; (3)they are not classified as vertical content producers, thus fitting the platform's most prominent feature of "life-sharing" rather than a specific field of commercialized media production. In the first month of my online observation, I encountered two potential informants who met my demands and were willing to conduct interviews with me. Later, however, I gradually found it not effective to search for enough potential interviewees on RED as direct messaging to them is the only way I could ask if they were interested in, which would make many people feel offended. So I made an interview recruitment which describes this research, the criteria for informants, and other information needed and posted it on WeChat and Weibo. A total of 60 people showed their interest in taking part in and 49 of them left their WeChat ID, which enabled me to later contact. After screening out people who only browsed the app rather than being content producers, I selected other eight interviewees based on the diversity principles. All of my informants are cisgender female aged from 20 to 28. Five of them are still students while the rest three work as freelancers and a communication officer in an embassy. All of my interviewees have an educational background of at least a Bachelor.

I conducted interviews in Beijing and Chengdu. Three of my interview informants had conventional face-to-face conversations with me while I contacted the rest by using video-calls on Tencent Meeting as we were in different regions across the whole country. As they were recruited by my post which had described all the information and agreements prior to participating, I did not send them the consent form but keep our chat recordings on WeChat. In terms of data collection, I used the function of *generating transcripts* on Tencent Meeting to note down our interviews, keeping all the recordings and documents in computers. Although the integration of data-gathering

methods online and offline is key to achieving rich ethnographic material (Sade-Beck, 2004), my comparison between my face-to-face interviews and online ones told me that this point did not really make a distinctive difference. While conducting interviews online, we are able to sustain conversations "beyond the scope of many traditional face-to-face interview sessions and the participants are found to enjoy the process." (Kinash & Crichton, 2003) Interviews lasted from 40 to 60 minutes, which were informal, semi-structured, and carried out in a conversational style. Ethnographic research is inherently flexible (Morse & Richards, 2002). My data collection, interpretation, coding and analysis was an ongoing process throughout the study.

During the interviews, I asked them questions centering on two aspects: their digital content production and their using of RED. Topics like their intentions for posting on RED, routines and preparation of posting, procedure of becoming a blogger, positive/negative feelings and emotions generated by browsing, perceptions of sociality on RED, etc. are all included in the interviews. The semi-structured format of qualitative interviews enables the researcher to receive rich and detailed answers and guarantees some degrees of flexibility in the process of investigation. Overall, the data collected in this study consist of interview transcripts also notes in a wide variety of forms, including online observational data such as users ' commentary, captions, writing styles, emojis, shared memes, use of acronyms and emoticons (Lindlof and Shatzer, 1998) and all of them were entered into computer files.

As for data analysis, I analyzed the collected field notes based on open coding techniques to look for patterns in the data, identify relevant themes and sub-themes and determine the relationship between the themes. My interview transcripts' analysis are predicated on the DIP coding method (Adu, 2019), which is an acronym representing the three main coding strategies: description-focused coding, interpretation-focused coding, and presumption-focused coding. In the process of description-focused coding, I firstly code these materials without interpreting and summarize data relevant to my research questions as empirical indicators. The next step is interpretation-focused coding, in which I "make meanings" of the empirical indicators developed in the first step — to "engage with data in capturing participants perspectives on their experience." Ultimately, the final coding strategy is to generate my own claims and presumptions while at the same time looking for the empirical indicators developed in the first two steps to support them. I structure my results by combining relevant themes and

presumptions together that guides the chapters of my thesis. These themes are platform affordances (including visualities of content, social media metrics, and platform vernaculars on RED), sociality and connectedness (including how they self-govern through shaping the bonding of affective labour and authenticity), and user strategies (including the strategies of self-branding, self-promotion, and negotiation).

4. Platform Vernaculars on RED

"A Place full of Glamour"

Yan started to use RED at the end of 2020. She began her career as an amateur RED blogger because at that time she was taking a course on marketing and was advised by her teacher to try operating an account of her own on a particular social media platform. At first, Yan wanted to do vertical content:

... then I said that I would run an account on RED. That is in December, I remember so clearly, and then I signed up. I chose RED because I think this is the fastest way to start, and at that time most of my posts were about fashion.

Yan is not the only one who choose to "start a life on RED" from posts related to fashion. In fact, all of among my interview informants contend that fashion posts such as the newest cosmetic products, nascent stylish make-ups and prevailing dressing styles, are the most recognizable, also the most visible forms of content on RED. As Yan said, she thinks the most popular (and important) things on RED are outfits.

"(after fashion) then came the content related to shops and stores, places of entertainment, and food. I posted very randomly. For example, I saw some fashionable stuff, I think it's very interesting, or a photo of a beautiful girl (celebritites or Influencers) I really adore, then I will post it. My posts are very messy. Anyway basically they are all pictures.

From Yan's words, we could also see that visual content on RED indeed plays a fundamental role within its interface design, which is also the major reason why it is usually taken as Chinese response to Instagram in western media coverage. In their studies on Instagram, Leaver, Highfield and Abidin (2020) especially underpinned its visualities as a key component of its platform development. Similarly, RED is an app dominated by various visual forms of digital content relating to the presentation of experiences, identities and communication (Leaver et. al, 2020, p.97). In other words, visually oriented platforms like Instagram are increasingly the site for identity-making online (Banet-Weiser & Hearn, 2018), and the visual is of paramount importance to them, which is also true for RED. However, while the early development of Instagram largely stemming from photographic content which even made it as a "digital

reimagining of photographic traditions," RED was a completely different case. If Instagram's foundational visualities in is early stage is photography, that of RED then, is centered on commercial products.

Figure 1. shows the interface design of homepage on RED. Once new users sign up for an account and enter the interface, they will directly enter the homepage whose feed is often occupied with four pictures (sometimes will be five or six if some pictures have been cropped), each of which represents a page of *note* (the name of posts on RED) of a particular blogger. At the bottom of its homepage, there are icons showing five different sections, consisting of *Homepage*, *E-Mall. Posting*, *Message*, and *Profile*. A title limited within 20 Chinese characters is demonstrated under each note. Below the title, the avatar of a blogger is shown on the left side while a heart-shaped icon representing the number of likes is located on the right side. If users want to like specific content, they could directly click the heart icon at the right corner below the post.



Figure 1. *the interface design of homepage on RED*

Firstly, titles are very important for digital content production on RED. Ming became a freelancer since a year ago. After graduating from college, she was not

willing to work a conventional white collar and started to take some work from design companies to make a living. At a time when one of her posts which is about the photos she took accidently gained more than 1000 likes, she started her life sharing on RED, ranging from uploading selfies to posting the daily dishes she cooked. She told me that she had known nothing about its algorithmic operations, but she underlined a key step to post popular content on RED

"... As I become more skilled in posting on RED, I learned from my experience that a title with attractive key words is very important if you want to be a successful blogger, and it has to be connected with identification. For instance, if you want to post content related to selfies, you could use some of your facial characters such as "a selfie of a girl with single-fold eyelid, this makes people relate to you, and generate a sense of identification in the title, and then may trigger the recommendation mechanism."

The cultural implications of aesthetics have been historically underpinned by feminist media scholars. In a digital age, the politics of feminine body and beauty has become a resurgent field intersecting gender, media platforms and technology in overlapping ways in a neoliberal context. Sofia Elias et al. (2017) argue that neoliberalism makes us all "aesthetic entrepreneurs," the meaning of which has moved beyond the scope of professions such as models or people working in fashion or design. In their analysis, they contend that the notion of labour is important for feminist media scholars to engage with the different forms of aestheticised cultural work in self-presentation and identity-making on digital media platforms (Elias et al., 2017, p.5).

But what does it mean when talking about the "aesthetics" of a single platform while faced with the enormous amount of digital content genres and complex media ecology on RED? Does it refer to a particularly recognizable "RED-style" aesthetic? Is it about categorizing all the colors, filters, compositions of the images circulating on the app? In their case study on a social media campaign of popular feminism called "Strong is the New Skinny," Banet-Weiser and Hearn (2018) content the body image campaign is "more about the image of a strong female body," and "how often and widely" this image is circulated, rather than about "empowering women with strong bodies to then challenge patriarchal norms or institutionalized racism." Therefore, they revive the notion of glamour as a potential descriptor for digital platformed content production. The concept of glamour here does not refer that all of the platformed content are

aesthetically glamours. Instead, it points out three intertwining features of digital content production on platforms, namely media circulation, metrics, and platforms, are respectively in accordance with the the visual codes and instrumental logics of glamour.

Drawing upon their works, this concept is indeed also appropriate to theorize the visual content circulating on RED. Firstly, the interface has set up a distinctively glamourised media content genre, which could be revealed through Amber's experience:

"When I think about using RED, I'd say this app is all about 'looking good,' and looking good is like a consensus. Whether the place you take pictures of, the food you post, and of course yourself, you look good and you will be liked. I feel that on RED if a blogger posts something, the comments would all be compliments: so beautiful, so gorgeous, nice hat! And then to link, share, and find where to buy it. But the platform ecology of Weibo or Douban definitely will not be like this: a person posts a thing, and then the comments are like in a equal conversation, or to share some of their own opinions. There are very few posts which are pure words on RED, right ? Most of them are pictures. But they share one thing in common, which is looking good."

Amber's feeling is not a subjective description. As shown in the box used to explore different categorized content at the top line (shown in Figure 2.), the channels presented nearly cover all the aspects that constitute an idealized life with the pursuit of being chic, decent and glamours. Secondly, the instrumental logic of quantification is also inscribed in the organization and measurement of platformed content, which is not always "objective" but has its distinctive aesthetic qualities, making social media metrics as the "epitome" of glamour (Banet-Weiser & Hearn, 2018). Apart from conventional forms of social media metrics such as the number of likes and comments users receive or how many followers they have, the viewings, both of users' postings and hashtags they are likely to add, are *intensively* juxtaposed after these two types of texts. In this way, users on RED are consistently reminded that they have the potential to become microcelebrities even though sometimes they initially don't mean to. Seven expressed her feelings in our conversations:

"... I really never thought about 'starting a business' on RED! But after releasing my first post, it really had such a huge impact on me that I even feel that my life was a little bit off track. Because of the sudden increase of followers, I just wanted to keep active and make this sustainable... I checked the data even in class, to see whether there

were new followers, messages, comments, likes, or collections of my content... This status lasted for at least a week or so, and I was immersed in that joy for the whole week, pleased by those figures."

In this way, the viewings of each post and hashtag, which only allow users themselves to privately track in their own profiles, are functioning as distinctive forms of social media metrics on RED, to a larger extent legitimating themselves as social capital, and increasing the likelihood to activate users' desire to see and devote to the growth in those numbers. In the words of Banet-Weiser and Hearn, this obsession with "capturing an a ever-receding goal," could be seen as "definitional of the power of glamour."

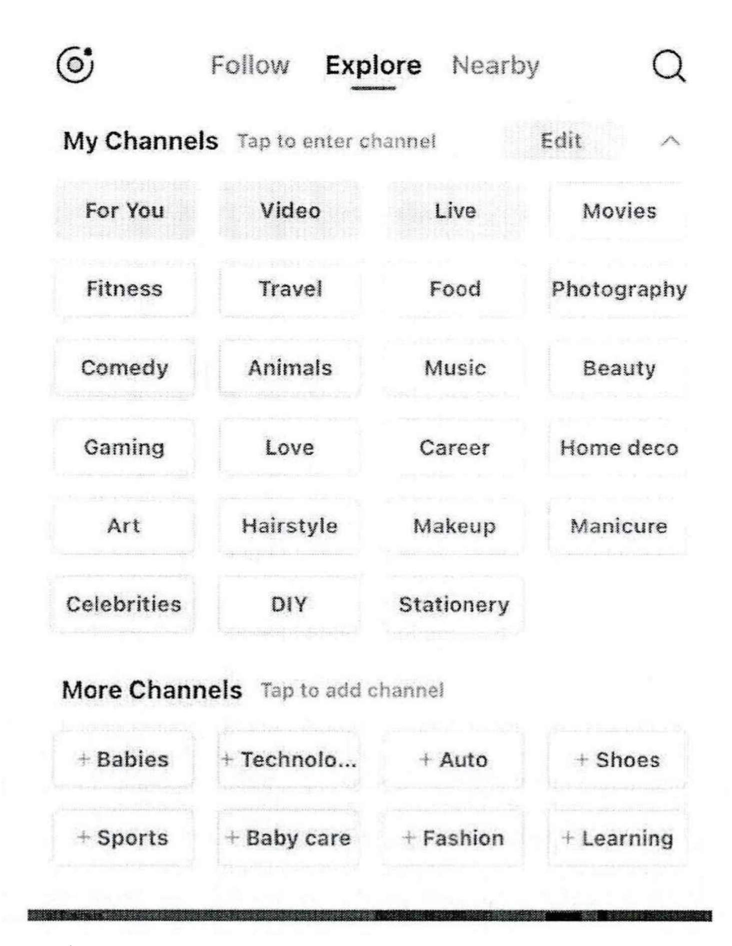


Figure 2. *different channels representing categorized content on RED*

Navigating "Being Authentic"

In the realm of consumer culture, authenticity is often used as a narrative to portray digital laborers' identity and an instrument to appeal to their followers. Among many works of digital cultural production, it is proven that "authenticity" has functioned as a strong narrative for mediated coverage of digital laborers and other

social media participants, in which they draw upon themes like "realness" or "ordinariness" to establish themselves as more relatable (Duffy, 2017). In the case of RED, I aim to explore in what ways authenticity is utilized for young female to organize daily activities and to construct their self-identities. Here I argue, the instrumentality of authenticity is to a large extent facilitated by the platform. Although the interface of RED is largely reliant on visual content, the title, however, is also an extremely essential "building block" during the process of shaping this virtual community. During my online observation on RED, titles are often discovered to be presented with strong emotions and feelings inscribed in. For example, many popular content consist of strongly subjective and emotional expressions with exclamation marks such as "the most!" "sincere recommendations!" or "this product drives me crazy!" In addition to emphatic punctuation and discourses, these titles often accompany diverse emojis. As Yan said:

While I was searching for how to run my account on RED, I learned from many tutorials that the platform especially encourages Biaotidang (clickbaits in Chinese), meaning that I need to write my headlines as sensational as possible if I want to be recommended to other users and become visible on their homepages.

In this sense, RED is renowned for its representative platform vernacular that is strongly emotional or sentimental, sometimes in an exaggerating way. Emotional labour here constitutes a part of the discourse of "being authentic." In her research, Duffy (2017) proposed that authenticity "seems to be a productive myth that enables aspirational labourers to carve out a space at the margins of 'traditional' industries and professions, while down playing their existing social and economic capital."

Also, when I asked Ming to talk about how she felt about RED, she commented:

"I still want to say that generally speaking, the users on this platform are mostly women, who are more polite, friendly, and kind, so the atmosphere here is really nice... speaking of if they are 'authentic' enough or not, I think of course they are not totally 'real',as for me, when I post something on RED, I also select certain content, I'd not say I am totally being 'real'."

As Seven said:

... *Especially as a "Punv"* (a self-deprecating way to describe ordinary girls in Chinese) — *I take it as a neutral word, I just can gain great confidence here, you know? I feel that they will tend to encourage those relatively ordinary girls. It's true, For*

example, nearly everyone will praise me for my realness and ordinariness under my posts, whether they are, and then actually as an ordinary girl, I actually very happy, and I feel recognized.

Therefore, instead of assuming there is an "actual" or "real" self behind one's online image, scholars employed a performative understanding of identity to suggest that "all self-presentation in digital and physical spaces is curated and controlled." (Abidin, 2018b) Authenticity, then, has become understood not as an inherent quality, but rather part of a "performative ecology" (Abidin, 2018). On social media, the performative nature of authenticity may be reflected in choices users make to appear 'real' to others.

However, not all the affective labour could be understood as taking shape in a positive form. In her studies on crying videos on YouTube, Misha Kavka (2018) argues that crying vloggers, who upload videos in which they cry in front of their cameras, perform a different kind of affective labour, repudiating previous assumption that "the sense of connectedness and community generated in affective labour can only arise from positive feelings." Such vlogs operate within a 'booming economy of affective labour' where 'mediated tears, sobs and struggles' cement authenticity and strengthen ties of digital intimacy between YouTubers and their followers (Berryman & Kavka, 2018). Yan told me such a experience of her which could demonstrate the digital intimacy produced by negative affections on RED:

"I just have to give you one example, once I saw someone judging another girl under her postings, I felt very uncomfortable, so we just argued in the comments. When that person came to swear at me, I reported it to the platform ... I was quite moved at that time, because later I saw that many people in the comments were also coming forward to help me to argue with that person... I felt that we were connected through a same feeling of anger, with regard to that person's inappropriate behavior."

Tagging Your Life

"RED, tagging my life." This is a big slogan lying below the icon of RED before we enter its API. Like Instagram, Twitter, or Weibo in Chinese context, RED also has tagging functions, including editing your posts with tags or using hashtags in the caption. Hashtags are a form of written text preceded by a hash symbol (#), which usually appear at the end of traditional post content on social networking sites. The

term hashtag began on twitter, when it was suggested that the "tag" be preceded by a symbol sometimes referred to as a "hash." Among scholarship on social media platforms, hashtags are often considered as affordances for classification and categorization. In this view, users can take advantage of this platform affordance to assist in the spreadability of content online which is likely to be more visible. Instagram content with hashtags, for example, demonstrates how the visual is used for "sharing and communicating significant social experiences" (Leaver & Highfield 2018). In their works on Instagram, Leaver et al. (2021) also propose that hashtags also overall provide their own "tropes and aesthetics." Content under a hashtag may be completely different in aesthetics, but could be interpreted as a same trope. As they analyzed, "images posted as part of #ThrowbackThursday (#tbt) or #FlashbackFriday (#fbf) on Instagram share less a common aesthetic between images, but instead a common marker for presenting prior experiences, younger selves and reminiscences." In some cases, the popularity of a trope could be also seen on other platforms as "user-led and platform-directed initiatives." (Leaver et al., 2021, p.155)



Figure 3. *clicking #Topic to add a hashtag*

The function of gaining attention and visibility is often considered the most predominant logic inscribed in technology design of social media platforms. In the case of RED, as shown in Figure 3., when users click *#Topic* to add a hashtag, entering another interface even without typing anything, a total of ten topics based on algorithmic mechanisms which track the content genres you have browsed most frequently will be automatically generated below. Once typing text, they will transform into recommended hashtags with the corresponding number of viewings on the right

side. For users, some of these hashtags will be introduced as "trendy topics" in the search box on the top of its interface in advance of scrolling through content under a specific "#" and explore various images, pictures, and other visualized content. Within each hashtag, the trope is less uniformly visual than the presentation of a singular category of objects, thus "adding layers to the lives and personae" (Leaver et al., 2021) presented on RED.

Hashtags on RED, then, are easily characterized as the platform affordances as a form of self-promotion. As Ming demonstrated in our interview that besides titles, hashtags are important for a successful post though they are more invisible as they are located under the captions at the bottom of a post. Using hashtags is then located as a strategy of self-branding in a context of consumer culture and postfeminism in contemporary media landscape. As Banet-Weiser (2012) argues, this practice will "situate girls and young women ever more securely into the norms and values of hegemonic gendered consumer culture," while they are predicated on strategies for "identity construction" that centering on more progressive ideals rather than just a backlash of feminine sexualization and objectification. She contends that notions like empowerment, individuality, and entrepreneurship, are shaping the discursive and ideological space of the Internet as well as providing the logic for girls' post-feminist self-enterprise. In her research on "aspirational labouers," similarly, Duffy (2017) also contends that female bloggers understand their practices in digital cultural production as "imperative to their creative projects" because they try to market themselves and approach audiences and advertisers as soon as possible, during which a "brand identity" is taking shape across various social media platforms. In terms of the gendered division of this concept, she builds upon Campbell's (2011) concept of "labour devotion," which capitalizes on marketers' assumptions that "men loyally consume their favorite brands whereas women actively promote their favorite brands to other women" (Campbell, 2011, p.500), coining the term of "entrepreneurial brand devotion" to demonstrate that digital content creators visibly align themselves with certain commercial brands "in the hope of riding on their coattails." (Duffy, 2017). This notion further develops that of Campbell to pay attention to the industrial construction of gendered consumer subjectivities, resisting gender essentialism by rejecting the presupposed assumption that women are born to be more social and more willing to promote brands and commercial goods. Analyzing on girls' video production on YouTube, Sarah

Banet-Weiser argues that it offers an opportunity to think critically about the ways in which the platform is a site for self-promotion or the creation of the "self-brand" (Banet-Weiser, 2012). In the field of digital cultural production, there is an emphasis on self-branding as a conscious "impression management strategy" that deploys "cultural meanings and images drawn from narrative and visual codes of the mainstream culture industries." (Hearn, 2008) One of my interview participants, Seven, is a blogger who has accumulated more than 2000 followers on RED. She created an account on RED last year after finishing the graduate entrance examination, and her initial intention was using the platform to share some experience on her preparation for the test. As shown in Figure 4., Seven usually used more than five hashtags in the caption of a post. Seven's words brought insights into how the affordances of hashtags contribute to a strategy of self-promotion:

"After my fans reached a specific level (500 or 1000), RED invited me to apply for verification, after which you will get access to other functions ... In other words, you can obtain the "power" to advertise for commercial goods. This means that you can add something like a link in that post, and then you can click that to shop. There is another kind of verified bloggers belonging to vertical content... you could be certified in terrains like beauty, education, vlog, traveling, shopping, and food. There is no threshold for this kind, you can apply for verification by yourself. Ever since I started to post on RED, each piece of my "notes" will have a hashtag. I learned it from other relevant posts on the homepage, such as #2021Exams, #GraduatesDaily. If you did this, the Internet traffic would be relatively larger.

应试技巧:
突击记忆！突击记忆！突击记忆！一直到进考场前最后十分钟，都不要放弃法制史背诵，我去年就突击到了法制史简答题的内容，10就get啦！法制史基本上无费脑的高难度内容，性价比很高，大家不要放弃！
加油😭😭
#中国法制史 #法制史 #22法硕 #法硕 #法硕考研 #我的考研 #我的考研 #考研经验 #考研经验谈
法考客观题经验已出
法考主观题经验已出
法考法硕如何衔接经验已出
背书技巧已出
主页查看即可

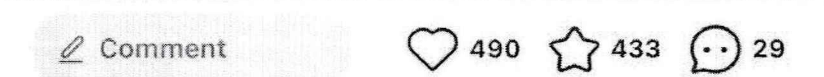


Figure 4. *Seven using hashtags to post on RED*

But while investigating this specific platform vernacular with the use of hashtags on RED, I found that among my informants, the there are also other intentions beyond categorization or gaining visibility on social media sites. As Seven stated:

"I think RED is really magical because you know, RED is not the only social media platform that has the function of hashtags, but I feel that I'm more likely to use this on RED, and feel quite comfortable using this. I think it's the same as many bloggers I followed... I guess one reason is because you are more likely to broad your network on this platform. On Weibo, WeChat or even Douban, there are many people I know, such as my families and friends, more or less I would think if it's appropriate to post there. But RED is really random, you can never expect how many comments, likes, or followers you will receive the next day."

Seven's discussions reveals a process in which young female users are carefully evaluating the use of social media platforms in relation to the specific kind of post they are producing. Hashtags here on RED, in Seven's views, are not only for the purpose of simply becoming more visible, but also a way for young women to communicate their emotional and affective context, allowing them to reposition their experiences within a broader network of people whom they share the same interests with. As I discussed

above, RED actively engages in shaping its specific discursive circulation of *Zhongcao,* in which content being widely shared, communicated and disseminating among users are mostly monetized by the platform. But Seven believed that RED was the best place for her using hashtags and refused to put a similar post on other social media platforms. This could be understood that each platform affords Seven a different kind of "imagined audience" (Marwick & Boyd, 2011) based on the connections afforded by the platform vernacular of RED (one way "follower" relationships) and Facebook ("friends" that must be mutually accepted by both parties). In this way, Seven's comments challenge widely held discourses that suggest young women are uncritical participants in a social media landscape where they merely become victims of platform capitalism. These discourses are often perpetuated by regulatory education programs that suggest girls are to be irresponsible social media users and must learn how to better manage their online networks (Dobson & Ringrose, 2016). In contrast, Seven's words illuminate that some female users on RED have been carefully weighing what platform and audience they post their content to.

From *Zhongcao* To a "Search Engine"

According to Gibbs et al. (2015), the vernacular of a platform is not only emergent at its platform affordances, but also shaped by the mediated practices and communicative habits of users. In other words, while the platform affordances of RED such as likes and hashtags are built into the hardware and software "delimiting particular modes of expression or action, and as a result prioritize particular forms of social participation," there is an ongoing process of interaction and negotiation between the platform and users about how subjects engage in the formation of platform vernaculars that in some occasions are reversible to the expectations of platforms.

Social media functions likes, comments or visual content, as well as social media practices like advertising and promotion in the context of sharing economy are not specific to RED, but the use of RED involves a shift of platform vernacular moving away from initial *zhongcao,* as a practice of monetizing social media metrics and promoting themselves, to a social activity including broaden its scopes and communication genres to experience sharing. In the case of RED, the platform was initially understood and perceived as a consumerist decision-making portal, where they look for product-related content before choosing which things to buy in various aspects.

However, as they gradually explored the diversity of digital content on RED, they started to think about use it like a search engine going beyond a consumerism-oriented portal, which involves hybrid forms of visual content going beyond. Yan explained this:

"I think "life" is really the core concept of RED. I know there are also many other similar platforms out there, but on RED you really just have to focus on the practical aspects of "life", no opinions or discussions. RED to me now is even like a search engine, where you could nearly find ways to do anything. So "zhongcao" for me, is not to advertise for or promote something — I do not receive any incentives! And I never think about be an influencer or something. Instead, "zhongcao" is like an activity that could benefit others, which I learned from my experience of using RED."

I further asked my informants about why they think the platform is functioning as a search engine. In other words, I want to examine how platform vernacular is taking shape between the platform and users' different forms of digital participation. In the case of RED, it could be characterized into three aspects, which I will discuss below. According to Amber, she descried using RED to post stems from her opinions that she always has clear purposes while using it:

"If you use RED, your intention are actually particularly clear, either beauty, or dressing, or good food, good drink, fun, some leisure and entertainment. Douban or Weibo is more like a place to discuss topics and exchange ideas, while on RED they communicate in a different way, it has a kind of discourse like teaching, teaching you how to do it...... RED always seems to have one person posting, one sender, and then the rest of the people are receivers."

Seven also points out that RED to her if often for practical use:

"For example, if we want to go out and travel, there are many new things we want to try, the first thing we think of is to go to the Little Red Book to search for places that look good, places that are delicious, places that are fun, this is a travel aspect, and then including weight loss, learning aspects, for example, how to write a literature review, I recently did this double eyelid surgery, and I recently had to do a very important surgery, as long as I do not understand, I will basically go to the above search. I feel like it has infiltrated every aspect of my life."

Yan instead, argues that the content diversity is also a characteristic of the platform vernacular on RED

"I remember the earliest time I was in college with RED, everyone is basically in the store above the grass and so on, and now, there are really all kinds of sharing, such as my previous IELTS exam, on RED there are many bloggers sharing those IELTS materials, learning experience and so on......Some people may just did pretty well in IELTS, and then post it on RED, so you can DM to them, who can send you some notes. In fact, these people may not be professionals or commercialized bloggers, who are just kind-hearted."

This statement reveals a clue to understand the evolving interaction between the specific communication genres and tropes afforded by RED and how users appropriate and adapt them in actual practice. Although the mode of *zhongcao* was facilitated and afforded by the platform technical and material design, according to the aforementioned female bloggers' articulations about their media practices, however, I argue that the platform vernaculars on RED are shaped between the consuming-oriented logics of platforms and the information practical-oriented logics of users. The search-engine-like use of RED is not intentionally configured by platforms, but has been described by Gibbs et al. as "drawing on, and constrained by, the architecture and rhetorical style" of the platform use: "a smart-phone platform that allows users to instigate a conversation with their social network by sharing photographs." (Gibbs et al., 2015)

As Duffy (2017) suggests, the industrial construction of gendered consumer subjectivities often involves the assumption that women are uniquely social and thus more willing to promote branded goods. In the case of RED, it is designed as a platform to affect consumer options of Chinese young women which was achieved through a communication genre of "notes" consisting of the common affordances of photo sharing, social media metrics, and hashtags as other platforms, but this affordance also "includes the ability of women to network and share information directly relevant to their experiences." (Campbell, 2011). Similar to Campbell's research on iVillage, the user-generated content disseminated through the popular content page covers a much wider range of topics such as "career advice, current political issues, and opportunities for social activism" despite the platform generated content that dominates the app initially focuses on women's cross-border shopping especially consumption on cosmetics and skin-care products, mom & baby necessities, luxuries, etc.

In this way, *zhongcao* moves away from its consuming-centered meanings and expectations for exchanging social media metrics with economic rewards, but provides

a more pragmatic communication genre which covers various kinds of information beyond the scope of consumption.

5. The Formation of Users' Perceptions

Between Companionship and Comparison

While RED devotes to advocating authenticity and promoting the corporate concept of beauty, glamour, or perfection, it has been recently accused of cultivating an environment for showing off wealth and photoshopping everything. These phenomenons could be understood as a part of the negative effects generated by social media, which has been generally allocated to the process of social comparison. In some scholarship, it has been proposed that social comparison is extremely is pertinent to social media because comparison targets are largely peers, in contrast to the models appearing in fashion magazines. According to social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), the quest for self-evaluation drives individuals to seek out comparisons with similar rather than dissimilar others. On RED, users tend to upload only their 'best' photos, ones that have been carefully taken and selected to maximize attractiveness and which can be further enhanced by filters and digital alteration. In this, they are engaging in a reciprocal process termed "social surveillance," whereby individuals not only closely examine the content uploaded by others but also critically examine their own posts from other people's points of view. Such social surveillance is important because, in viewing the content generated by others, users come to 'formulate a view of what is normal, accepted, or unaccepted in the community' (Marwick, 2012), and modify their own posts accordingly. The end result is that comparisons with Instagram 'peers' are most often upwards in direction (Fardouly et al., 2018), resulting in dissatisfaction with one's own body and appearance. In support, some experimental studies have shown that state appearance comparison mediates the observed effects of idealized Instagram images on body dissatisfaction (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016).

I asked my informants about whether they feel this social comparison anxiety, which was the reason why RED has been criticized in public discourses, Amber told me that she came up with an experience that she thought was related to this:

"*... It is also a personal confusion. I recently worked in an NGO which recruited two interns, the other girl got her Bachelor abroad. We both go two days a week, but one day is very coincidental because the HR arrangement had a little problem, so we both went. Then I saw the girl, she is very tall, thin, and delicate, with makeup, but I*

just dressed really casual.

Amber explained to me that they had never met with each other before, and just bumped into each other on that occasion. Her confusion is that she is fairly aware of her capabilities of "being sophisticated — there is nothing wrong with that," however, she still got anxious when she saw a character similar to those bloggers on RED. This experience reminds Amber to think about the negative feelings generated by using RED:

"When I was using RED, I followed those famous ones, I didn't follow some ordinary people who were particularly sophisticated, so I didn't get bothered in that aspect. But I find that I still get anxious when there is suddenly a real person around me who is much more sophisticated than I am, and I am actually more comfortable with myself, which I think is perfectly fine.

From Amber's experience reveals that instead of viewing these young female users as totally passive victims of social comparison and uncritically engaged with participation in this media landscape, many of them, however, are super aware of the negative feelings and emotions of social comparison brought by social media. As Seven also expressed the impacts of using and posting on RED:

"For me, there is of course an impact. I will very carefully examine my body — sometime even in a crazily detailed way. I will check if my muscle is too big, if my collar bone is obvious, etc. I am super aware that these are bodily disciplines towards women, but more or less, I just can not help with being affected by these things... I think this is also one of the biggest problems on this platform, and also now most of my peer girls. The aesthetic is really singular. I try to tell myself that I was not affected by some of these beauty standards, I'm healthy, but I actually care, and I think in China basically many young female will care...

In terms of how she tackled this problem, she said:

"So my approach is that I try to try to use natural methods, I do pay attention to my appearance, but I try not to use artificial means, such as injections or medical surgeries... I think this will be better, because some people pursued these too extremely. I think you do not have to be too hard on yourself, as long as find your own balance and try be more natural."

Seven's words further reveals the strategy of dealing with the effect of social comparison brought by a gendered meritocracy discourse circulating on RED. Although

young female are aware of this comparison, they tend to downplay this factor and put more emphasis on a self-technology — whether it is being confident, pursuing nature or provide oneself with more self-care.

A Male-excluded community

While addressing the question of how female users on RED understand the role of platform in online sociality, another important factor is its sense of "female community", namely the predominant position of young female users' practices on this social media site. As I discussed in the previous chapter, RED is predicated on the development of "her-economy" which saw a prosperity of Chinese transnational e-commerce shopping. In the past year, however, the platform has made efforts to broaden and diversify its users in terms of different genders, age groups, and economic status. In a recent interview of Kenan, the COO of RED, said that RED has expanded its users in the last two years — the users are not only limited to young female, but also male, middle-aged people, or elderly groups have appeared in the community. "It is important to know that the label of RED as a 'young female community' has been deeply rooted in public discourse, and this gendered narrative sometimes deepens people's prejudice against this product (Kenan, 2022). In Kenan's view, the diversification of digital content on RED are attributed to male users entering this online community:

"Men obviously have their own logic of content consumption. For example, their demands are very clear: I am here to solve the problem: where to go for this weekend, how to decorate the house, dads with children coming to RED to find supplemental recipes and tutorials... They are the typical users who use RED as a search engine."

But during this process of "de-gendering" the platform, how social media users themselves — those female users on RED in this case, have understood and articulated their use of RED in this changing process? Among my informants, nearly all of them are quite resistant to RED's efforts to explore male markets, for example, Tang showed her thoughts on this question:

"I don't want to see RED inviting more male users in at all, I've observed a trend of the platform wanting to optimize their revenues by diversifying users and then expanding their revenue. For example, I've heard that they've placed ads for RED on Hupu, but it's very irritating that the ads they placed in Hupu are really misogynist."

Consequently, this characterization of RED points to the issue that, many users view RED as something more than a commercial platform. This is indicated in their comments on the platform that it cultivates a friendly "women community" by excluding male users. Tang thinks that RED, as a vibrant online community, is worthy of her emotional investment. More importantly, the platform is framed as a very specific form of community, a place constructed "by" and "for" women. Some scholars have noted that the designers of web sites would hook their audience through the promise of familiarity and security, playing on the real fear many women have about personal safety and vulnerability in both physical and virtual spaces. For example, Warnick (2012) also notes in her study that media coverage of "abduction, harassment, and intimidation of women participating in chat rooms, listservs, and bulletin board postings" had a "chilling effect on women's interest in venturing on line". In this way, concerns over safety are quite understandable given the way in which women engage with digital space and the they encounter. Female users on RED like Tang's needs for online safe spaces play a prominent role in their involvements in various forms of participation on the platform. This sense of security is then in part, achieved through frequent media content of make up, cosmetics, fashion, etc., the ubiquity of which would help to establish a gender identity and credibility within a safe, friendly, and female community. In their elaboration of digital ethnographic methods, John Postill and Sarah Pink's (2012) contends that the framework of "online community" suggests a distinct, bounded group that can easily be identified, approached, and studied. In the case of RED, an online community for young female is then shaped when a fixed group of consumers whose needs are met by commercial products, with the same interests and values, with the characteristics of high aggregation, communication efficiency and consistent action, the formation of which has opened up a new way of information dissemination.

Also, another key to understand the development of RED as an online community lies in the activity of users and the quality of content. Although in the early stage of development, signing up with influencers or celebrities were the keys for the platform to start community operation. Later, as the number of bloggers on RED increased, ordinary users gradually accumulated more data flow based on the posts of their own experience. The content production system within the community gradually achieved self-loop, with the characteristic of decentralization gradually took shape.

6. Conclusion

This thesis investigates a feminized digital platform positioned as a manifestation of postfeminist media culture with a focus on its platform vernacular, as well as how its female users articulate the specificity of this social media site for digital cultural production. While there has been emerging scholarly attention to gendered subjects in the process of platformization, there has been little analysis of the ways in which the digital platforms as technological architectures shape the ways in which female subjects practice, labour or shape sociality in the realm of digital cultural production. This lack of attention to the specificities of platform has resulted in generalized discussions about "a postfeminist era" without a clear articulation of young women's varied platform-based practices that are made possible, encouraged, or even monetized by a specific digital platform. Besides, the complexity of the living experiences of these postfeminist subjects have been glossed over.

From a technological perspective, I firstly explored how the platform RED is designed to *afford* the platformed practices of gendered subjects, in which the predominance of visualized content within its interface design accelerate the emphasis on glamour, shaping its platform vernacular of "an exquisite life." *Zhongcao* is a particular platform vernacular of RED developed as a mode of voluntary work, in which a gendered assumption of women are more likely to devote to brand promotion has been inscribed. In its interface design, a gender bias is reproduced and normalised that women are more likely to promote brands in consumption, instrumentalized by the platform to cultivate an online community where females actively engage with *Zhongcao* economy and participate in the promotion of corporate brands through social media. Therefore, this vernacular is predicated on the gendered assumptions of marketers that men loyally consume their favorite brands whereas women actively promote their favorite brands to other women, and also reinforce rather than undermine existing hierarchies of gender. In this way, an individualistic and entrepreneurial discourse is indeed deeply enmeshed in and widely circulated on RED, pointing to the issue that digital female users' platformed practices are often glamorized, romanticized, or termed as a "style politics" (Gill, 2016) that newly emerged in media landscape. Besides, using visualized content and hashtags, the platform orchestrate the interfaces

and affordances to set up an affective environment targeting at women for optimizing female users' emotional labour, accelerating the monetization of their labour of brand devotion.

As many scholars have pointed out, however, the formation of a platform vernacular is not fully material, technology, and design-oriented, but an ongoing process of negotiation between the platform and the users' practices. Plarform affordances are also not experienced in isolation, but rather in relation to a complex ecology of other tools with other affordances. As action possibilities cannot be determined once and for all, but need to be grounded in people's own perceptions and experiences." (Bucher & Helmond, 2017). Thus, affordances simultaneously exist for people at multiple levels and across platform boundaries. Through female users' own articulation of their usage of RED for specific purposes, they are not only passive victims of the negative feelings generated by the platform (eg. social comparison). Instead, they are often fully aware this situation despite the corrective for dealing with these issues is still centering on themselves. The platform itself, then, is then characterized as not only a site for consumption, but also for its position as a search engine-like, decentralized, and gender-friendly community.

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Appendix

Interview Outline

Experience of using RED

1. When did you start using RED?

2. How often do you use RED?

3. What types of content do you view most often on RED?

4. When did you first want to post your own content on RED? Why?

5. Who is your favorite blogger on RED? Why?

6. Do you interact with bloggers on RED? (comment/like)? Why?

Digital Labour on RED

1. The process of posting content RED

2. How do you define the categories and classify the vertical content on RED?

3. What are your motivations or expectations to post content on RED?

Evaluation of the Platform

1. which features of RED do you find most attractive? (In what ways is it different from other social media?)

2. Some people think RED is a female user-friendly platform, what do you think?

3. There is xx content on other social media (Weibo, etc.), when you look at the equivalent content on these media and RED, what do you think is the biggest difference between them?

4. Do you feel that RED has any impact on you? In what specific ways? What influence do you think it has on female around you? In what ways?

5. Have you ever paid attention to the trend caused by RED (eg., A4 waist and other topics related to female body aesthetics) ? What do you think about these? (give a specific example or story) Have these discussions affected your personal life?

6. Some of my other participants felt that they tended to rely on RED's algorithmic recommendations while using it, have you had this experience? What is your attitude towards such algorithms? Why?